



BEYOND BELIEF NETWORK

Beyond Belief Network Guides: Lending a Helping Hand

One way that local secular humanist groups can help their communities is by lending a hand to individuals and families who need help. Because churches and other religious groups are a huge provider of clothing, food, and other necessities, many nonbelievers find themselves needing aid but don't have any place to turn. Secular humanist groups can fill that gap, but are rightly concerned about scams. This is a guide to helping needy individuals while minimizing the likelihood of being scammed.

Screening people who ask for aid

- Find out whether anyone in your group knows the person.
- Google them to hopefully find a profile on LinkedIn, Facebook, Atheist Nexus, etc. or news articles mentioning them that back up their story.
- If the request came via email or phone, ask the person to meet you in person or attend a meeting if you do not know them.
- If you're still uncomfortable, ask them for personal or professional references.
- Your decision might also depend on what kind of needs they have, so ask. Make sure they understand up front if you're not willing to solicit money from your group.

Deciding what kinds of aid to provide

- First, ask the person what they need. Sometimes they might be so overwhelmed that they have no idea. Nearly everyone can use groceries, phone cards/minutes for a pay-as-you-go-phone, and gas cards.
- Second, decide with your group what kinds of aid you're willing to provide.
- Here are some ideas for types of aid:
 - Volunteering (providing services like childcare, meals, transportation, cleanup following a natural disaster or fire, etc.)
 - Supply drives (needed supplies like groceries, toiletries, clothes, gift cards, toys, etc.)
 - Communicating with other charities ([Secular Avenue for Exit](#), [Modest Needs](#), other local groups)

Communicating with your group

- You will have to give your group information about the recipient so your group can decide if they'd like to support them, but be cognizant of recipients' potential desire for confidentiality. This is a balancing act, because you need to provide your group with enough information that they'll feel comfortable giving without making the recipient uncomfortable. It might be a good idea to let the recipient approve any communications to your group members.
- In all likelihood, it's neither possible (or recommended) to keep the recipient anonymous within your group (if you wouldn't give to some anonymous member of a group whom you don't know, you shouldn't ask your group to, either). You might also need to advertise, which will necessitate sharing some details in a public forum.
- Unless your recipient indicates otherwise, use first names only in any media that will be public. A good rule of thumb is that if someone could find it by entering the person's name in a search engine, don't post it.
- Don't forget to check the privacy settings on Meetup pages, Facebook groups, and other online message boards. If those groups are public, so are your posts.
- If you post videos of your events or newsletters online, you will also need to watch that you don't inadvertently expose your recipient's identity.
- When describing the person's situation, don't reveal any details that would make them embarrassed (again, it's a good idea to run the final message by them in case there's confusion about what was on or off the record in your communications).

Providing aid in a compassionate manner

- Ask the recipient to attend in person to receive any supplies and to receive support from your group. You might get some resistance from the recipients, but it's a good faith gesture on their part, particularly if they're new to the group. A good way to approach this is to ask them what future event they can attend and plan the drive for that day.
- That being said, don't make them a spectacle (e.g., don't ask them to stand or say something unless they've given permission in advance).
- Consider having your group sign a card or give an extra unasked-for luxurious gift (e.g., a massage, chocolates, iTunes, movie tickets, a child-free evening, etc.). In all likelihood, recipients feel bad about the situation and having to ask for help. It's also likely that they've denied themselves luxury. Make sure that the gift won't cause them extra inconvenience (e.g., requires driving from someone without a car, requires childcare from someone unable to afford it).
- If collecting used or perishable items, sort through them before you give them to recipients. They shouldn't have to wash dirty clothing, throw away trash, or pick out

expired cans of food. Also consider organizing a drop-off of the supplies so they don't have to move lots of boxes.

- If providing services, set up a calendar of services needed. Encourage members to sign up for days and times so recipients aren't inundated with help one week and left in the lurch the next.
- Find other charitable organizations in your area and get in touch with them so you can direct members in need quickly. It will make recipients feel more comfortable if you can give them a name and a phone number of someone who'll help.

Summary

- Screening process
- Google search to determine if the person exists (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn, news, etc.)
- Contact leaders of atheist groups they mention
- Ask for references who can verify their need
- Resources list to nominee
- Suggest applying for Modest Needs grant or put them in contact with Secular Avenue
- Check FBB charity database for additional poverty resources in their area (or additional resources that they might need, like legal aid, etc.)
- Google search for charities, if necessary
- Make them aware of the atheist groups in their area, especially BBN groups

Some important tips if your team decides to raise money

- If your group is interested in raising money, make sure they understand that contributions to individuals are not tax deductible and should not be called "donations."
- Consider consulting a lawyer, particularly if your group is a 501(c)(3).
- Do not give large amounts of cash to an individual.
- Ask for receipts or bills and pay those directly.
- Consider buying gift cards rather than money.
- Ask them to set up a Modest Needs grant page which you will publicize to your group. This is an especially good idea, because Modest Needs requires financial documentation of need.